DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 476 180 TM 034 903

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TITLE	The Powerful Influence of Research Journals beyond Collecting Data.
PUB DATE	2003-04-00
NOTE	8p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Chicago, IL, April 21-25, 2003).
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Data Analysis; *Data Collection; Data Interpretation; Elementary Education; Elementary School Students; *Journal Writing; Research Reports; *Researchers; Self Concept

ABSTRACT

This study examined the influence of research journals beyond their function as a data collection instrument. The researcher used a research journal to record field notes and write reflections and to develop a better understanding of the research role. The study that is the focus of the discussion was an examination of the development of self-awareness development among fourth graders that was based on 30 sessions of observation and mediated lessons by the researcher and group interviews with 5 school staff members. The immediate field notes of the researcher were supplemented by reflective notes taken a few hours after the lesson. Rereading the journal helped in the organization, and finally, the interpretation of the data even as the journal documented the development of the researcher. (SLD)

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The Powerful Influence Of Research Journals Beyond Collecting Data

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Introduction

Qualitative researchers highly recommend keeping a research journal. In fact, some researchers (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999; Merriam, 1998; Taylor & Bogdan, 1998) consider research journals to be similar to field notes. As Merriam suggests "Besides writing field notes during observations, you write memos to yourself about methodological aspects of the study, about emerging findings, about your own reactions and reflections" (p. 24). The purpose of this paper is to examine the research journal as an important data source. Moreover, as a result of my experience using a research journal in a variety of situations, I realize that the contribution of the research journal extends beyond the current study in which it is being used. By using a research journal for both goals: to collect data and to reflect on the research process, one develops a better understanding of herself and of her role as a researcher. In this paper I will present an integration of previous studies and the process I went through, my conclusions, and my suggestions for the future.

Objectives

- To examine the personal processes and changes I went through as they are reflected in my research journal
- To explore other researchers' views of the role of the research journal

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Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association in Chicago, IL
April 2003

- To explore the importance of using a research journal during situations other than research studies, and to suggest a variety of situations in which educators may use a journal.

Theoretical Framework

Every source of information is relevant to the overall development of a study and its implications; therefore, researchers should use as many sources as possible, including their own thoughts and reflections (Merriam, 1998). Although some researchers may claim that their role is to collect data from the environment only, they should include themselves as part of the environment. Researchers should keep in mind that "the data collected during this time may prove extremely valuable at a later date" (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998, p. 35), and, therefore, they must not ignore any source of information. A research journal allows a researcher to record her field notes and write her reflections, both of which are valuable sources of information. Moreover, documenting all data in a research journal enables one to reconstruct, to integrate, and to organize all the data at the end of the study from a clearer perspective. In addition to developing a clearer perspective of the data, I found out that by keeping a research journal I could also develop a better understanding of my role as a researcher. Nastasi (1999) suggests using written notes whenever they do not disturb a session. She bases her suggestion on the premise that the researcher's understanding of the field must be integrated with the data in order to achieve deep understanding of the data and of the study. "As a general rule, audio/videotaping does not replace fieldnotes as a method of recording the ethnographer's impressions and capturing more global aspects of the context" (p. 8).

Data Sources and Results

Most of the data for this paper came from the notes I wrote in my research journal throughout the study I conducted as part of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in educational leadership. During the years before I began the final study for the dissertation, I kept journals for two different classes. The purpose of both, as my professors presented it, was to help the students to reflect on the readings and on the class conversations. Sharing the journals with classmates was optional; therefore, I allowed myself to go through a process of reflecting on personal issues that related both to the class and to me as a doctoral student. By doing so, I could reflect on and follow the reasoning of many of my decisions. I felt that I had researched myself, and that I became more aware of the process I had gone through. As a result of this understanding of myself, I knew that a research journal had to be part of my doctoral study when I focused on the final research for my dissertation. After graduating from the doctoral program I became a pedagogical counselor in a teacher-college. I realized in order to become a reflective counselor, that reflects both on her work and on her students development, I needed to use a journal to collect my thoughts. Reading the journal once in a while contributes my awareness of the process I go through with my students, and helps me become the educational leader I wish to be.

My dissertation research focused on understanding self-awareness development among fourth grade students. I integrated 30 sessions of Mediated Learning Experience (MLE) and collected information through a group-interview with 5 staff members of the school, through individual interviews with the students and with their teacher, and through class observations. In addition, throughout the 30 sessions, in which I both mediated and observed the students' behavior, I used the

Instrumental Enrichment program (IE) that Feuerstein (1994) developed. Almost every day I recorded my interpretations of the data, how I felt they would relate to the study, what I should have done, and how I felt it all affected me. I took two types of notes: first, after each interaction in the field, I wrote my thoughts and feelings concerning the new data in my field notes. Then, a few hours later I wrote reflections in my research journal that focused on possible ways I might embrace the data in the study. Not until I began organizing the data did I realize that my interpretations of the data and the research process were as important as the data I collected. The data from the research journal significantly contributed to the process of understanding and making sense of the data. Moreover, keeping an updated research journal contributed to my ability to follow my thoughts and to discern whether or not my interpretations formed any pattern.

Following my own thoughts and reflections throughout the study is one example of a significant contribution the research journal made to my study. I began my study with a group interview of 5 teachers and staff members from the school. The major purpose for conducting this group interview was to understand the teachers' views of self-awareness development and to use their views as a basis for the following interviews and observations. At the end of the study I realized that there was a gap between the teachers' view of the students' body awareness and my interpretations of the collected data. While I struggled with how to present this conflict without undermining the teachers' view or my role as a researcher, I decided to reread my research journal. While reading my own journal I found that not only had I previously struggled with the issue, but also that I had already begun interpreting my findings. I wrote that

> Teachers that spend few hours a day with their students, and that are aware of the students' self-awareness development, may notice some areas where the students develop their awareness, while a researcher who comes once in a while cannot notice them (February 20, 02, Research journal).

This note from the research journal helped me both to organize the data and to strengthen my confidence that every interpretation I made as a researcher was important, even if I did not see or interpret the data the same way as others. Moreover, I realized that every note in the research journal was as important as the data I collected. Since then, I developed better understanding of the importance of the research journal and I have begun writing in the journal with more motivation in order to keep track of my reflections and to make them useful for me in the future.

On other occasions I noticed that the research journal documented my own development as a researcher. I moved from a stage in which I was asking questions that focused on the search for practical answers, to a stage of asking questions that focused on the search for deep understanding and further questions. For example, no longer did I ask how would a certain child's behavior contribute to my doctoral research. Instead, I looked into each piece of information in order to find links for new studies that might have been done in the future. Accomplishing the study was no longer the only goal but a major stage I had to go through in order to become a better researcher and a better educational leader.

Conclusions and educational significance

1. One can understand the importance of the research journal only by writing one and by reflecting on the writing.
2. Every researcher should keep a research journal and should use it both during the study and when she organizes the data.
3. More attention should be paid to the contribution research journals have on both the study's results and the researchers themselves.
4. A research journal is another way to become a reflective person; researcher; educational leader.
5. Teachers should learn how to use research journals in their work as a significant source of information that may help them follow and understand both the cognitive processes and the personal development their students' experience.

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